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The Strategic Imbalance

The top-secret, year-end intelligence report on the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance, the gravest since World War II, is getting final touches—and, for a change, no major dissents—before being sent to President Carter and President-elect Reagan shortly.

Between the lines, the report from Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, demolishes hopes of the arms control lobby that a new arms limitation agreement (SALT) somehow can restore the strategic balance of power. One official familiar with its details told us the report spells this out: growing superiority of Soviet strategic missiles can only be overcome by "new production, not new controls."

Known as National Intelligence Estimate 11-3-8 covering the new year of 1981, the report is the first in several years to emerge from the intelligence community without serious dissent from the CIA's Turner. "The admiral has hardly any footnotes," one insider said. Footnotes are the traditional mechanism for dissenters to register disagreements without forcing major revision in the main text. For the past three years, Turner and some of his Soviet specialists have either been ferocious footnote writers, or have been the targets of profuse footnotes by Pentagon realists.

The CIA's tendency to downplay Soviet progress in outspending and outproducing the United States in the weapons of strategic warfare has not been limited to the Carter administration. Beset by internal feuds, the CIA in 1976 hired outsiders (known as "Team B") to help its own experts prepare the NIE 11-3-8 covering the first year of Carter's presidency.

Since then, Turner's dissents to the findings of other agencies have tended to dilute the final product. Thus, the estimate for 1981, now getting finishing

touches is the first in years solidly backed by both career and political officeholders in the intelligence community.

Their agreement shows that debate over Soviet superiority has been resolved in favor of experts who were once called alarmist by the arms controllers. Those arm controllers, in turn, are forced into the back seat.

To the incoming president, the more than 350 pages of NIE 11-3-8 will make frightening reading, for all of his campaign promises to build U.S. strategic strength back to "a margin of safety." The report contradicts the major Carter administration claim that this nation's strategic strength gives it "essential equivalence." That was a dubious conclusion when it was first pronounced nearly four years ago and one now torn to shreds in the new intelligence estimate.

Tearing it to shreds were Carter's repeated decisions slicing off and discarding one strategic program after another. They included the B1 penetration bomber, the neutron warhead for the defense of Western Europe, accelerated development of the big land-based MX missile, the Trident submarine and cruise missiles.

Carter's thesis was the heart of error: we don't need these systems because we already have essential equivalence; what we need is arms control.

Instead, warnings issued when Carter became president have prematurely borne their bitter fruit. He was warned that the United States would face a "window of vulnerability" by the mid-'80s even if he ordered full speed ahead on these discarded systems. He did not, and the "window" is now prematurely open. Reagan has little chance to close it during his first term.

This reality explains why Reagan's national security insiders were so angered by the distortion of Reagan's SALT position

given the West German Bundestag by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. This reality makes a grotesquerie out of Sen. Charles Percy's message to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev that Reagan places the highest priority on a SALT accord.

The new NIE 11-3-8 study of the strategic balance mocks such pleasantries. Reagan will assume office at a time of gravest danger to this nation. Nothing but diplomacy and perhaps a little bravado stand between U.S. security and Soviet power to wipe out U.S. land-based missiles and bombers with a single counterforce attack.

Arms control talks, or even agreements that eliminate major hazards from Carter's dying SALT II treaty, cannot rectify the strategic imbalance that Turner is about to document for Carter and Reagan. The CIA's findings leave only one route to safety: production of new weapons systems, without any speed limit.

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